

The World Would Not Give: Stories

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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By

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ABSTRACT

The World Would Not Give is a collection of ten short prose fictions, portraying characters in middle to late life as they wrestle with the intricacies and rhythms of daily life. Structured as a series of linked stories, the thesis explores themes related to aging including: late-life marriage and infidelity, parenthood and caregiving, sex and sexuality, faith and God, anxiety and depression—ultimately asking: What does it mean to grow older?

The World Would Not Give is inspired by linked short story collections from authors such as Alice Munro, Elizabeth Strout, and K.D. Miller. The thesis works as a traditional collection of independent short stories that, when read sequentially, also follow a progression.

My aim in writing the thesis was to question how aging influences character development. The goal is to make sense of growing older by understanding how the aging process might influence a character's choices or how characters might change and grow as a result of the aging process. In so doing, I also wanted to explore how character development and theme could impact a book's form. In my treatment of the linked short story form, I hope to have achieved a balance between independent single stories and the progressive whole. Likewise, in my treatment of the influence of aging on character development, I hope to have given voice to the experience of middle to late life. In this way, *The World Would Not Give* is a reclamation of vibrancy within the experience of aging and an homage to the tradition of twentieth- and twenty-first century linked short story collections.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

Aging,
our bodies collect wrinkles and scars
for each place the world would not give
under our weight.

—Julia Spicher Kasdorf, “First Gestures”

Taking its title from the poem “First Gestures” by Julia Spicher Kasdorf, in which the poet speaks of aging in its various forms and stages, my collection of linked short prose fictions entitled *The World Would Not Give* explores the intricacies of the human experience from the perspective of aging.¹ The questions that drive and inform my writing are treated with particular reference to the development of characters in middle to late life who continue to make meaning in their responses to the world: Why do people make such strange and curious choices? What informs their actions? How do they react to the unpredictability of life’s circumstance, and how are they changed as a result? In this way, *The World Would Not Give* portrays characters in the context of aging as they wrestle with thematic intricacies of human experience. Themes explored include marriage and infidelity, parenthood, desire and sexuality, faith and God, depression and anxiety. Some stories, such as “Mothers and Daughters” and “Companions” focus on questions of caregiving: who cares for the aged when they are no longer able to care for themselves? Other stories such as “Snowbirds” explore what it’s like for aging parents as they remain the primary caregivers of aging children. How is attraction and new love experienced in middle to late life? How is conflict dealt with? What new hinderances, or problems, present

¹ The wider context of the key lines I have chosen read: “...Think of the time / and things we accumulate, all the while growing / more conscious of losing and leaving. Aging, / our bodies collect wrinkles and scars / for each place the world would not give / under our weight” (Spicher Kasdorf 3).

themselves to those in middle to late life? Through ten linked short stories, *The World Would Not Give* gives voice to the experience of aging, ultimately asking the question: What does it mean to grow older?

Constance Rooke affirms that “[t]he old person picks up the human story at a pivotal and richly dramatic point, when the evaluation of life seems most urgent, and when the question of what comes next is most poignant” (Introduction ix). While I am concerned with this “pivotal point in the human story,” I put pressure on Rooke’s singling out of “the old person,” replacing it with the aging person. In so doing, I take my cue from Mike Hepworth in his introduction to *Stories of Aging*:

By ‘aging’ I mean the period usually described as the later part of life; that is, the period in the life course following on from the years normally labelled ‘50+’. I do not treat this label as anything more than a social convenience; following mainstream gerontological thinking I treat aging not simply as a matter of chronology or biology but as a complex and potentially open-ended process of interaction between the body, self and society. (1)

In fact, in certain instances, I push the ‘50+’ designation back to ‘40+’. In this way, *The World Would Not Give* examines the influence of aging on the second half of life.

Narratives of aging are often categorized as narratives of decline. The term *Vollendungsroman*, as developed by Rooke, describes narratives of “completion or winding up” (Wyatt-Brown 2). Rooke explains that this genre deals with the “[l]ast phase of life (old age) [which] involves leaving the social circle, or disengagement... [as well as] the transcendence of ego, which may be translated as a willingness to let go of social power” (Introduction x).

Portrayals of senescence (senility and decline) are often prevalent within this genre, such as in Kingsley Amis’ novel, *Ending Up* or Michael Ignatieff’s *Scar Tissue*. Yet alongside narratives of

decline comes a literary imperative to make meaning. Rooke argues that “a special intensity characterizes the *Vollendungsroman*, an intensity resulting from the felt proximity of death. The imagination of the writer is challenged by the invention of an aged protagonist; the writer’s responsibility (assumed on behalf of the character) is to seize some affirmation out of the jaws of death, to discover meaning in the face of nothingness” (“Oh What a Paradise It Seems” 208).

Another element of the *Vollendungsroman* is the perspective of a life in review, as exemplified in Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel* or Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*. According to Rooke, “[t]he elderly protagonist is often cast as a person looking back on (or reading) the ‘story’ that he or she has written and continues to write in life” (209). In this way, memory plays a significant role within the “winding up” genre.

In contrast, *Bildungsroman* refers “to the novel of youth or growing up” (207), a genre characterized by generativity and growth. “In a *Bildungsroman*, the young protagonist will effectively construct his or her identity through a quest or moments of revelation...” (Hobbs 110). While the term has been traditionally and “rather indiscriminately [used] to refer to written accounts about young people...” Margaret Morganroth Gullette uses it to describe “a new kind of novel, the progressive narrative of the middle years” (xi, xvi). This approach takes “a positive new vision of aging...” (146). Gullette’s language of the progressive narrative through the lens of *Bildungsroman* is helpful in offering a more nuanced way of understanding how aging might influence character development.

Many of the narrative arcs within *The World Would Not Give* depict characters in late-life and are more heavily balanced towards loss than gain, using flashback as a literary device to explore memory. For this reason, it could be argued that the thesis falls firmly within the *Vollendungsroman* genre. Yet, because the collection also explores characters not yet in late-life,

exploring narratives of discovery and newness, it also seems to meet the expectations of the *Bildungsroman*. Beyond Rooke's terminology, therefore, it is Barbara Frey Waxman's use of the term *Reifungsroman* that better clarifies how the thesis might be categorized in terms of genre theory.

For Waxman "*Reifung* pertains both to ripening and maturing in an emotional and philosophical way" (321). Characters in middle to late age within the *Reifungsroman* genre have the opportunity to grow and change—to "ripen" rather than "wind up" as would be expected in the *Vollendungsroman*. Waxman explains:

In these works aging women come alive and readers become involved with them; when these characters grow up instead of 'down,' readers not only cheer, but are inspired to emulate them. These works act like a tonic for the middle-aged or older woman, reader and critic, who has been led by society in a hundred ways—from hair color commercials to the fashion industries' wares to the hiring of television news anchors—that at forty the best part of her life is over. (320)

An aging character's ongoing and expanding appetite for life flies in the face of the *Vollendungsroman*. Likewise, as the aging character is not a neophyte to life's predicaments and follies, the *Bildungsroman*, in this instance, is incomplete. Here, the *Reifungsroman* offers the aging character space to benefit from the wisdom of their years while yet remaining open to ongoing growth and development. This best describes the experience of characters in *The World Would Not Give*.

Throughout this thesis, I depict characters who have agency despite their slowing down. To this end, while I am interested in conveying stories that give voice to the human experience of aging, I am not interested in dissecting every nuance associated with the aging process. Neither

am I interested in defining my characters by their age alone. Rather, this collection asks how meaning is made different as a result of growing older. The guiding question behind my writing process, therefore, was not *what* is the specific impact of aging, but *how* does the reality of aging influence character development?

In *How Fiction Works*, James Wood explains, “we can tell a great deal from a character by how he talks and whom he talks to—how he bumps up against the world” (98). In this sense, aging—as portrayed in the thesis—becomes the context for how characters “bump up against” issues such as love, poverty, and faith. This is a distinguishing aspect of the thesis in relation to other aging-related short stories where the phenomenon of aging is the central problem. For example, Alice Munro’s “The Bear Came over the Mountain” deals very specifically with the problem of age-related dementia. Aging, in this case, is the direct agent, or antagonist, with which the protagonist, Grant, must “bump up against.” The same is true for the characters in Margaret Atwood’s short story “Torching the Dusties.” Atwood’s protagonist, Wilma, not only “bumps up against” a particularly strange and rare age-related degenerative disease affecting her vision, she must also “bump up against” a threat of violence from a mob of young people wearing baby masks—a threat directly connected to her advanced age and need for care. Sharon Butala’s protagonist, Grace, from the short story “Grace’s Garden,” also tackles the problem of aging head on. Butala’s character questions what value her life has as a direct consequence of her agedness. In these short stories, aging becomes the focal point, the force which drives the narrative forward. Aging is the central plot.

By contrast, stories within the thesis confront questions of aging not as focused content, but as generative context. Aging and its effects are present but only as the backdrop in which I explore subjects of regret, desire, and relationship. Likewise, characters are informed by the

process of aging but not defined by it. For example, in “Dressing on the Side” a character’s relationship with aging is shown through a minor mention of injectables during a scene in which makeup is applied. The story in which this scene appears is not about injectables or about vanity in later life. Rather, these details serve to flesh out the protagonist’s motivations which in turn influence how she interacts with other characters and with emerging plot points. In this way, the process of aging and its effects are present and influential in each story within the thesis, contributing to character development while not becoming the focus of attention. As James Woods indicates:

[T]he vitality of literary character has less to do with dramatic action, novelistic cohesion, and even plain plausibility—let alone likeability—than with a larger philosophical or metaphysical sense, our awareness that a character’s actions are deeply *important*, that something profound is at stake, with the author brooding over the face of that character like God over the face of the waters. (126)

Character development then is accomplished through minutely detailed, deeply important action. The specific and particular character details and actions conveyed throughout *The World Would Not Give* are predicated on and dictated by the realities associated with aging.

As such, the stories included in the thesis are more closely aligned to the work of Flannery O’Connor in her short story “Everything That Rises Must Converge.” While O’Connor’s protagonist, Julian, grapples with his mother’s advanced age, the central narrative is ultimately focused on issues of racism. Similarly, while the characters in Jhumpa Lahiri’s story “Unaccustomed Earth” are influenced by and subjected to the effects of aging, they are not tied to their advancing years as a singly focused plot line.

The stories in *The World Would Not Give* might be best likened to the work of K.D. Miller in her collection *Late Breaking*. While most of Miller's protagonists are in middle to late life, their stories rarely revolve around the nature of their advanced age. Rather, their age simply informs the choices they make and the ways in which they interact with the world around them. In an interview with *The New Quarterly*, Miller commented on her affinity for capturing the older woman as more than just a stereotype:

Harriet is Harriet. I got to know her as I wrote her—how badly she misses her husband; her difficulties relating to her son; her affection for her son-in-law; her friendship with Jill; her memories of Morgan, etc. I learned a long time ago that it is best to set a character free... I think the way to blow clichés and prejudices out of the water, as a writer, is to write as honestly as possible, with your eyes wide open... People are people. They are strange and mixed up and gnarled and full of all kinds of secrets and surprises.

(Gaughan)

While Miller's character, Harriet, is a woman of advanced years, she is nevertheless a woman with opinions, flaws, and charm. Her age doesn't define her; rather, it is a contributing factor to her development as a character.

As this thesis explores the impact of aging on character development, I wanted that same impact reflected in the overall structure of the thesis. Mirroring the ebb and flow of growth and aging, *The World Would Not Give* is structured around the passage of time. Collectively the stories span and progress over nearly one year, beginning in August and ending the following June. Like the theme of aging, this structural nuance stays in the background, referenced only in the changing season and months.

Likewise, the form of the thesis is significant for its linked nature. Inspired by authors like Alice Munro, Elizabeth Strout, Carrieanne Leung, and K.D. Miller, I wanted to portray the everyday lives of characters in their second half of life within the short story form while also recognizing the interconnectedness that resides within the human experience. For this reason, *The World Would Not Give* is structured as a series of ten linked short stories as a deliberate reflection of the interconnectedness of the human experience.

Using the term *short story cycle*, Forrest Ingram explains the linked form as “a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader’s successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his [*sic*] experience of each of its component parts” (19). Theorist Robert M. Luscher expands on this definition by explaining that Ingram’s term “draws attention to the recurrence of theme, symbol, and character, but does so at the expense of deemphasizing the volume’s successiveness. ... Within a sequence, the individual stories do not lose their distinctiveness but rather expand and elaborate the contexts, characters, symbols, or themes developed by the others” (149). While the linked nature of a collection is made evident only when read collectively, this does not negate the uniqueness of each individual story. Linked stories, therefore, function as a well-choreographed dance. Each successive story contributes to the beauty and cohesiveness of the whole. In turn, the story cycle in its entirety highlights the deft nuance of each independent story.

In this way, each story within *The World Would Not Give* works as an independent whole, depicting particular characters in particular situations. At the same time, each story hints at other characters or other plots that become more developed in later stories within the sequence. While the thesis follows a progression, the stories as a whole do not find resolution such as they might if they were part of a complete novel as in Caroline Adderson’s *Ellen in*

Pieces or Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman Other*. Neither are the stories linked by one specific character as in Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* sagas. Rather, *The World Would Not Give* works as a traditional collection of short stories which can be read independently while also following a progression, revealing a "cumulative effect" (Kennedy vii). As such, the thesis can once again be compared to K.D. Miller's *Late Breaking* and *All Saints* or to Carrieanne Leung's *That Time I Loved You*. Like these linked collections, the stories in *The World Would Not Give* revisit characters across various individual stories while using a particular locale and pervading themes as a linking device. As Luscher says, "[t]hese works should be viewed ...as unique hybrids that combine two distinct reading pleasures: the patterned closure of individual stories and the discovery of larger unifying strategies that transcend the apparent gaps between stories" (149-150).

My aim in writing the thesis was to question how aging influences character development. That is, how does growing older influence a character's relationship with her son? How might age-related decline influence a character's ability to parent? How are poverty and homelessness experienced differently in older age? The goal is to make sense of growing older by understanding how the aging process might influence a character's choices or how characters might change and grow as a result of the aging process. In so doing, I also wanted to explore how character development and theme could impact a book's form, revealing the interconnectivity of the human experience through a series of linked short stories. In my treatment of the linked short story form, I hope to have achieved a balance between independent single stories and the progressive whole. Likewise, in my treatment of the influence of aging on character development, I hope to have given voice to the experience of middle to late life. In this

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